Nixon Fretted He May Have Been 'Deaf' To Cover-Up Plot

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Nixon fretted 13 months ago that he might have been deaf to the overtones of a cover-up plot in 1972 Watergate conversations with his aides, according to House Judiciary Committee transcripts.

"I mean, God, maybe we were talking about a cover-up — Watergate. I really didn't. I didn't know what the hell — I honestly didn't know," Nixon told White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler on June 4, 1973, the transcripts showed.

The committee released its transcripts of the June 4 conversation Saturday as part of 1,069 pages of evidence considered in the impeachment inquiry.

The White House also released Saturday a 151-page legal brief submitted to the Judiciary Committee by Nixon attorney James D. St. Clair seeking to refute a broad range of accusations against Nixon.

The brief said there is a "complete absence of any conclusive evidence demonstrating presidential wrongdoing sufficient to justify the grave action of impeachment."

Presidential counselor Dean Burch also repeated contentions that the closed door committee sessions have produced leaks calculated to damage Nixon.

The committee has been hearing evidence and, more recently, considering articles of impeachment. It will continue closed door discussions Monday and Tuesday and hear arguments against impeachment by the minority staff.

On Wednesday the panel is scheduled to begin its deliberations with the public and press present. The House plans to vote Monday on a resolution that also would permit radio and television coverage of the debate.

The latest documents released by the committee disclosed that former Atty. Gen. Elliot L. Richardson told of White House pressure to fire Archibald Cox as special Watergate prosecutor as early as July 3, 1973, more than three months before Cox was dismissed.

In addition, the documents show that Cox attempted on June 27, 1973, to obtain Nixon's version of cover-up events described by his former counsel and principal accuser, John W. Dean III.

White House lawyer Fred J. Buzhardt responded a month later that Nixon would address Dean's allegations in a forthcoming public statement.

The transcript of Nixon's conversation with Ziegler, attended briefly by Haig, portray the President as confused about the cover-up implications of his conversations in February and March, 1973, with Dean and other confidantes.

As he listened to the tapes, he told Ziegler:

"It's not comfortable for me because I was sitting there like a dumb turkey."

Nixon also referred to his March 21, 1973, conversation with Dean in which Dean warned of a "cancer close to the Presidency," discussed clemency for the Watergate burglars and E. Howard Hunt's demands for hush money, and assessed the chances of criminal charges against various White House aides.

"We do know we have one problem: it's that damn conversation of March 21st . . ." Nixon said.

Discussing that conversation and previous ones, the President told Ziegler:

"What I was saying about this crap is that it's reassuring up to a point, but in fact, uh, at least, in this whole business, we, we sat there and we conspired about a cover-up (unintelligible) or not. We did talk about it on the 21st.